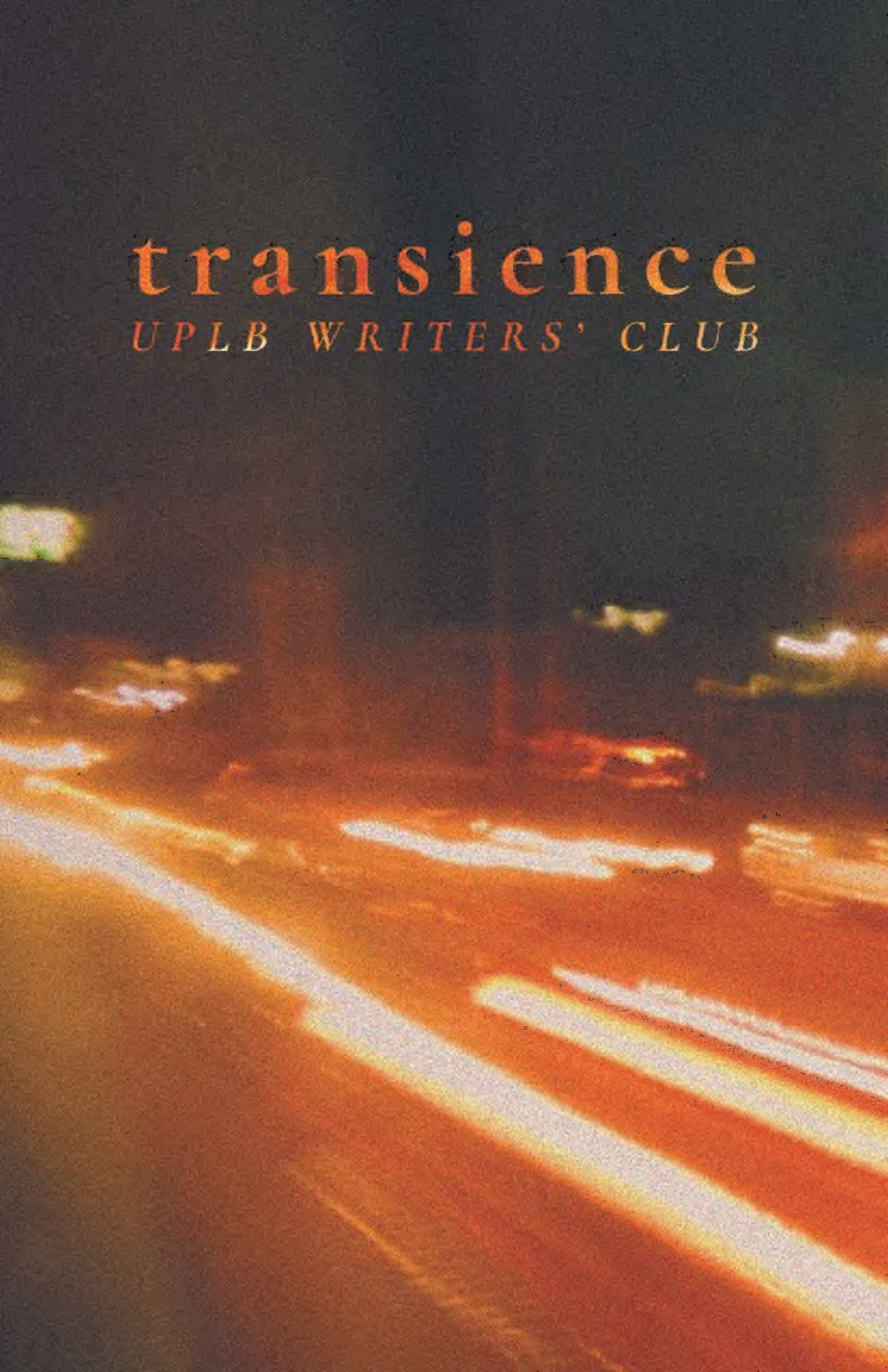
transience
UPLB WRITERS' CLUB

transience

UPLB WRITERS' CLUB

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MARY JOYCE BERNAL

Sunday

The doors open.

Sunlight enters, and so does the first customer. The young woman, a petite figure, walks between the shelves, her nose in the air as she squints at the packs of seeds atop the highest shelves. She stops next to a pot of fully bloomed yellow florals, her face breaking into a smile.

I fix my nametag and greet her a good morning, to which she responds with a bigger smile.

"What is this?" She was referring to the flowers next to her.

"Teddy bear sunflowers, ma'am."

Her eyes widen, nose lightly scrunching. "You sure?"

I shrug and gesture towards the framed piece on the center of the counter:

Be HONEST
Even if others are not
Even if others will not
Even if others cannot

She barely spares it a glance and lightly taps one of the blossoms. "Do you arrange in vases?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How much would a bouquet cost?"

"Around a thousand, but it depends on how many flowers there are."

Her smile turns to a frown, but she comes up with another question. "Do you have packages for events?"

Monday

The sky has been filled with gray clouds ever since we were dismissed, and it takes me several deep breaths to refrain from yelling at my last professor. For the last thirty minutes, he has expertly dodged reminders about his taking up of excessive time. If someone had enough courage to speak up, it is likely that I wouldn't find myself barely squeezing into a space inside a cramped jeepney, sandwiched between two high school students chattering about their first day.

If there is anything I can at least be thankful for the start of the week, it would have to be the lack of calls from my boss. Julian, even at his young age of thirty and his lanky figure, is a strong-willed and often scary man. Whenever I arrive at work late on Mondays, which I usually do, he makes sure to reprimand me while there are no customers. On Mondays, especially, customers in the afternoon are an uncommon occurrence.

This Monday is different. As soon as I step into the small, air-conditioned shop, Julian is standing by the counter, smiling at a customer filing through a clear book.

"You're here!" Julian's tone is warm – unfamiliar, but natural. The customer he's with cranes her neck to look at me, and I realize that it is the girl from yesterday.

I fix a smile on my face, raising a hand to wave at her while I make for the backroom. "Good afternoon, ma'am! Have you decided on a package?"

"I'm actually still looking through the packages." She turns back to flipping through the pages, tracing over the pictures of flowers. I hastily prop my bag up a chair in the backroom and change into my work shirt, sniffing the fabric conditioner I soaked it in last night before heading back out.

The telephone rings, and Julian gestures for me to talk to the customer as he hurries to receive the call. I take his place by the counter and find that the dress she is wearing is of a familiar yellow color.

"I thought the teddy bear sunflowers looked nice, so I'm all yellow today."

"Yeah, it's nice," I reply.

Before I can dwell on the lack of thought I have put on my response, she points to one of the packages on our clear book. "It's on Saturday, but our planner just told us two days ago that the shop doing the flower arrangements closed." She sounds tired despite the enthusiasm her appearance gives off – yellow dress, dimpled smile, and a posture that makes her seem a few inches above five feet.

I look at where she's pointing, realizing that she chose Package D – the cheapest possible choice for a rushed event. "Why don't you try Package C, ma'am? It's three thousand pesos more, but you get–"

Her smile wanes. "We really can't afford that. My family's in charge of the flowers, and we don't really have enough budget for anything higher than...."

I nod. "I understand."

"We actually found cheaper options, but I insisted on your shop because I found out you're the only one selling bouquets of colorful baby's breath flowers. A bit childish, but they've been my favorite flowers ever since. Also..." she trails off, a tinge of pink appearing on her cheeks. "we're really cutting down on expenses. So roses are a no for now."

A pause. "Did you know baby breaths symbolize long-lasting love?"

Her smile returns, but her shoulders visibly drop. "I hope so."

A flash of lightning disrupts the dimness of the city, and the first rain of the month comes.

Wednesday

She arrives at three. I find myself thanking my professor for cancelling our last class and the customers for not filling the shop like they usually do on afternoons aside from Monday. My mind pushes aside the worries for tomorrow's exams as she stops in front of the counter, across from where I stand.

"Good afternoon, ma'am."

"Hi." An already-familiar dimple appears on her cheek as her entire face lights up. "Where's your manager?"

"He just left. Have you contacted him? I can contact him for you."

"It's alright. I just came to pay for the package and talk about the flowers for Saturday."

"This Saturday?"

"Yes." She nods, shaking her head right after. "Right, I mostly talk with your manager for this. I didn't want to set it on Sundays when churches are filled for masses."

A few minutes of conversation later, with me finding out she's been a customer service representative for five years at a nearby mall and me revealing I've retaken more subjects than I can count in a degree program my father chose, we choose the flowers appropriate for the nearby occasion.

We finish at six, mostly because I explained to her the significance of the flowers and had to convince her I was not bullshitting her with romanticized information. As we return to the counter, she wipes her eyes before fishing money from her wallet – I found out she cries just as easily as she laughs.

"The joke's been over for ten minutes, ma'am. You can stop laughing now," I remind her jokingly, amused that she makes no effort to hold back her laughter even as customers start to walk in and out of the shop.

"It's okay. I–" She pauses to stifle what is left of her laughter. "I'll be crying nonstop on Saturday anyway."
I nod in agreement, grinning.

"I just hope it's out of joy and not... you know."

I nod again, pursing my lips.

Saturday

The flowers have been arranged at the venue early in the morning, Julian making me stay at the store to do the intricate bouquet arrangement. Despite being a student studying laws most of the time – which I did not choose to study in the first place – I have always been fascinated with flowers. Whether it's a curse or blessing that my father let me work at Julian's shop on the basis that Julian is his friend's son, I find enjoyment in arranging flowers for anyone and anything.

At nine in the morning, Julian arrives. He is in a crisp black suit, his curls pulled back in a secure ponytail. "Are you done?"

I nod, holding out the bouquet of tinted baby's breath flowers – pink, purple, and white. Julian looks at it, satisfied. He turns his focus on me, frowning at my uniform.

"Aren't you coming?"

I shake my head politely. "I got laws to study. Besides, I don't have anything to wear."

Julian laughs. "If only you could wear my suits. Anyway, that's understandable. Is this bouquet all that's missing?"

I stare at my craft for a good minute before walking towards one of the vases where fresh white roses stand. I pick three up, carefully sticking them to the middle of the bouquet.

"Did she request those?"

"I'll pay for them. Just think of it as my gift."

Julian shrugs, grabbing the bouquet. He turns the bouquet on his hands, satisfied at how the arrangement looks. "Are you sure you're not coming?"

I nod.

The warmth in his tone from a few days ago returns, and this time it is in my presence alone that he reveals it. "Just let me know if you need anything, Jess."

I nod, refusing to meet his gaze. He turns around, heading for the door. He is about to leave when he seems to have remembered something.

"By the way, she told me to send you her thanks in case she doesn't see you again. Told me she's leaving for Japan tomorrow. She said this time of her life probably won't be as memorable if you hadn't helped her get rid of her anxieties and, well, arrange her favorite flowers."

"Who?" I ask despite knowing who he is referring to.

"The bride. Well, I'm off. You take care," he replies, opening the door widely that the chimes ring their familiar, pleasant sound. It is the only time I notice how the city is sunny again, no traces of heavy rain from the previous days left.

The doors close.

Panamantala

JOHN DARYL ALCANTARA

mainam nang samantalahin
yaong mga pagkaka taong
tulad nito;
pangmadalian kitang
ipapasok, sa panandaliang
kayod, na di nga lamang
ganoon kaswabe
kung tutuusin
pwede ka na nga mag-
simula bukas basta
wag ka lang mag ingay
sa 'yong mga kasama
wala ka rapat
alam
mo na
sasagutang pagsu suhit
kame na ang bala dun!
panawid
gutom itong ina
alok ko sa 'yo bale,
wala naman talagang
mawawala kundi ikaw
susugal swertihan nga
lamang din ako,
tingnan mo, di naman
sa pagyayabang, umasenso kami
dahil sa pagtitiyaga
yung ibang tao d'yan,
(para sa 'kin lang 'to ah)
e mga tatamad-tamad tas
pro pa reklamo
mana'y pagyamanin na lamang

kung anong inihahain
sa ka nila
at sumunod sa sisteng kung tutuusin
ay panandalian lang naman
ano ba naman yung
kala
hating taong
pagtitiis
kum para sa isang buong
pamilyang gutom

Pansamantagal

JASON RENZ BARRIOS

Paborito ko ang pagpatak ng alas onse ng gabi,
dahil hindi ko na ramdam ang pagiging impyerno ng lungsod
Sa ganitong mga oras, bilang na sa daliri ang mga dumadalaw
na ligaw na kaluluwang naghahanap ng panandaliang matutu
luyan mga gutom na sikmurang naghahanap ng mabilisang pan
laman
at mga galing sa lamay na naghahanap ng mapagpapagpagan.
Sa ganitong mga oras, mabagal ang lahat
Malaki ang pinagkaiba, kung ikukumpara ko 'to sa alas onse ng
umaga kung saan ang lahat ay naghahabol sa takbo ng orasan.
kung babagal-bagal, mabilis na mapupuno ang linya
walang panahon para tumigil, kundi iilang segundo para
huminga
Naranasan ko nang magpalipat-lipat sa iba't ibang sulok sa sen-
tro, pero palagi ko pa ring natatagpuan ang sarili sa ganitong lu
gar kung saan ang lahat ay panandalian at mabilisan.
Walang nanatili, bukod sa tira tirang pinagkainan.

Marahil sa iba, ang paglalagi dito ay isa lamang patalastas tulad
ng mga napapanood na naging imbitasyon ng pagpunta ngunit
para sa akin, isa itong tuloy-tuloy na palabas
na palaging kong inaabangan ang katapusan
Matagal na akong paulit-ulit na bumabagsak sa ganitong
sistema. Sa katunayan, kaibigan na ng mga binti ko ang ngalay
habang naitahi ko na sa pisngi ang ngiti para sa mga bumibisita

Naisin ko mang umalis, pero mahirap nang maghanap ng iba.
Pwede na rin siguro ito, kahit pansamantala

timed lapse

BIANCA MARIE CUSTODIO

I stood, stunned, as I watched the golden orange canopy before me melt into ribbons of pinks and purples. The echoes of little feet padding the ground, the playful bursts of giggles from the children playing across the street had all started to mute into the slow, monotonous buzz of dusk- scheduled traffic. In the other room, I could hear the cheery, showy tunes of my favorite commercials dissolve into the faint hum of the evening news anchor's dull voice reporting yet again another death in the streets. Downstairs, excited chatter faded into murmurs later drowned out by the intensifying clanging of plates and clattering of silverware. The deep, slow grumble of the boiling pot filled with last night's dinner, the tense shuffling of the overdue bills atop my rotting kitchen table had just then filled the room frozen. I could barely hear the worry in my sigh, the crack in my worn-out step. I leaned further into the ledge of our window, stuck my head out into the cold yet humid July wind, and watched as buildings and street lamps alike glowed anew, slow dim blinking replacing the steady bright of the sun's rays as it too pressed itself further into the horizon. The sky had now sunk into a deep purple, and in exchange the cold in my stomach rose to the center of my chest — *it was all the same*. Noise had simply been replaced with more noise; light displaced more light; the afternoon warmth superseded by the cool of night. All the frowns and smiles I had so much as mustered to give had all dissolved into the inevitable; the equilibrium. *Why was it all the same?* I fixed my gaze to the stars, stunned, as I breathed in the sudden coolness of the evening pressing closer. The warmth of day had shut itself away. *Had it always been this way?*

the rain does not want pretension

CHRYSTEL THERESE DARBIN

ruin

the sun has its own darkness
We were walking side by side as I witness how the sun reduces your body in an outline no features, weightless.

we had been walking for almost half an hour under this heat of a midsummer July, and my guts tell me that if I lift my head up, the remnants and skeleton of the house will then be visible

you were once enthusiastic visiting this place, as you twist my hair into braids and remind me to never complain on what they put on the table

I always tried to conceal the pain of having my hair pulled a thousand times, and having my tongue taste the creatures I loved long before. By behaving, this way, I can meet her. This way, I can make myself believe that I am not alone
I grew fond of making my hair into braids and from preventing myself from being attached to any creatures capable of being served in my plate - but you were wrong when you said this way, I can meet her. Since then, I never saw her again. [1]

[1] I remember the day she told me she had to leave. "Mama said doctors do not live in a quiet place" We were nine years old, I never knew what she meant back then, but we were both sure that she was going to be a good doctor someday, she was always so careful about everything.

I always visit this place but every time you come home and insist on coming with me, it was a different feeling. I thought finally, there's another soul that waits Maybe there's more chances of them coming back

even though they have nothing to come back for [2]

you then decided to already stop coming Every time we pass by this place, you never stop or even look back.
the house never looked a little happier when we passed by it. no one waiting at the gate.
I wonder why I still feel connected with this place

I stare at your back fading away as I feel the familiarity of this place
and that very day that I cursed the rain for not coming.

cleanse

I never expected that this time will come that it is I who would have to insist on going here
you used to be the one forcing and I resisting every sunday of my childhood

[2] the fire sent thousand sparks climbing through the stairs where she and I used to run, the flames went from room to room, where we hid ourselves until someone had to scream our names. Now, all that was left was a skeleton. The house is nothing but ashes, remnants, ruins. I can't blame her for not coming back.

I dipped my finger in the holy water font under the uncanny statue of the Virgin Mary [3] as you said that I should have just placed my finger in a gutter.

"Still, it came from the heavens. It is holy."

you told me that my stubbornness reminds you so much of your mother my lola, and that I might be her reincarnation

"she finds peace in the rain. maybe she still does. But ma, I don't. I don't anymore."

I hope the Virgin Mary forgives us for talking about reincarnation in her place

as I do the sign of the cross, I wonder how much of your beliefs have changed.

we both left the place, with the woman [4] still on her knees

---

[3] I always thought she would look better in white but as I stare at the Virgin Mary, with her now faded blue veil and droopy eyes, I can't almost recognize her. She looked naked without her blue veil. Her eyes that was once pleading, now emotionless. Are statues really allowed to be placed outdoors without even a shed to protect them from the sun? and rain?

[4] there was a woman praying for about half an hour now, every now and then I hear her whispers, her breath is filled with different names.

she prays for everyone. Maybe no one in her family goes to the church anymore.

that explains the emotionless Virgin Mary

fade

we are waiting for the bus to arrive as I stare at the walls in front of me

it reminded me of those in our house that I used to fill with the letters e-s a-n-g before it was replaced by hundred posting of unpaid bills, letters, and family pictures.

you never called me by that name again,

"it's not something you call a grown-up lady "

some people just don't want to forget

wipe

I cannot stop thinking of the broken bridge we saw earlier

Today, I finally had the courage to accompany you to the bus stop and to acquaint myself in this place again. It was never the same

---

[5] the writings on the wall of love letters and of names that may or may not belong to a human body; they thought they could have preserved a moment. sadly, everything passes, everything fades, what stays is only this feeling of abstraction.
my eyes wandered to find signs of familiarity, of names I could have heard before or those I could have loved but choose not to.

There are those that are being replaced by another and there are those that are just completely gone, erased by the rain, unable to leave a trace.

how can one forget the horrors of the past 6

"I wonder if the government has plans on rebuilding it."

"There's no use. No one goes to that other side anymore.."

The rain does not want pretension.

"The bus tickets are getting pricier and pricier. I don't think you'll be able to go home again next year "
or maybe you will
for the silence of this place
is what reminds you that you'll rather have chaos

"I will

when the weather's nice." 7

---

[6] *Two years ago, a super typhoon named 'Tsa' stole a lot from this place - houses, roads, trees, bridges,*

lives.

[7] The rain does not want pretension
but I still wish she'll let this one slip.

Daybreak

TONI YSABEL DIMAANO

12:00 AM

The clock strikes midnight, it is a new day. New dawn, new start, new fight to get through. I just won over a huge load of academic requirements and their deadliest deadlines, but I am losing to the drowsiness from the night before. I looked around and studied the white-walled confinement I've been calling home for the past few months. The bodies who claim we go through the same struggles already in deep slumber even before the twenty-second hour. Slowly, the silence in the streets of this unfamiliar city became a flopped lullaby for my weariness.

How can you sleep with the fear of never waking up?

A peek from my small glass window brought the sight of a cloud of fog descending itself over the nearby mountain to cover Mariang Makiling and her animal friends. I wished I had a blanket to comfort me when the voices in my head kept getting louder and louder just to say, "You are never good enough." Not the 400-thread count woven type, but the type with a soul and arms to wrap around me to reassure me that I deserved to be here in the first place. A reminder that I chose to see the statue of the naked man standing arms open-wide even if it meant I had to get out of the blue-painted room that screamed safety. A very scary thought.

Think about all the risks you didn't take

Minutes of pacing across the room did not help my aching bones. The undone bed is just a manifestation of another unsuccessful attempt to call it a day. My stomach rumbled. I thought of the last meal I've had which was about fifteen hours ago. The flickering streetlamp which illuminates the room from outside seemed to understand what I'm going through. Is this short circuit? Maybe. Will the change in my pocket last until Friday? I hope so.

La Luna called me to have a glimpse of her beauty. She had been here for a while and I never even realized until now. Luna reminded me of distance and sorrow, so I took this rectangular piece of science which was supposed to connect the me to other miserable souls just to see the other side of the world having fun as I lay in fake ease. The devil's hour is a lonely hour.

Happiness is so frightening

4.00 AM

Four in the morning came so swiftly. I am tired of being awake. I wanted to drift away and finally escape. I thought of dreams I could have dreamed if only I closed my eyes. If only haven't waited for the next hour to arrive in the form of cold breeze and worsened feeling of emptiness, maybe my days would have been better. But was it really my fault? I think and I think until the sky turned into a lighter shade of midnight with a slight hint of amber. The streets began waking up, bodies coming back from

oblivion. My heart is heavy, my head is light. I found myself pray
ing to a spirit I almost hardly believe in

7.00 AM

I wonder what today brings *Three cups of cof*
fee, will I be just fine?

I hope it is true when they said things are just tempo-

rary

Passenger

ARA JOYCE MENDOZA

Sa maraming sitwasyon, mas mahaba pa ang nailaan mong oras sa pagsakay sa pampublikong sasakyan kaysa sa mismong lugar na pinuntahan. Malubhang daloy ng trapiko ang may kasalanan kung bakit ang mga 'pasahero' ay hindi na lamang basta sumaglit bagkus ay mistulang nakatira sa gitna ng kalsada at ang kanilang pupuntahan ay isang lugar na hihintuan lamang. Marahil dapat ay hindi na gamitin ang salitang 'destinasyon' sa mga lugar na pupuntahan dahil pati ito ay saglitan. At ang tunay na tirahan ay kung ano ang iyong binabalik-balikan

May kilala akong ginawang tirahan ang hindi dapat. Kilalang kilala ko siya dahil sa kaniyang maraming identidad. At narinig ko na ang kwento ng buhay niya sa kaniyang mga pananaw ngunit palaging tungkol sa iba. Basta ang alam ko lang tungkol mismo sa kaniya ay hindi siya masamang tao at mag nanakaw. *Yun ang sabi niya.* Pero kahit na ganoon, hindi niya ako kilala

Nagtaas ng dalawang piso ang pamasahe ng bus na nasakyan ko. Hindi pa gaanong siksikan dahil kakasilip pa lamang ng araw. Sigaw ng konduktor at palabas sa telebisyon ang umaangat na ingay. Lahat ay handa sa isang panibagong biyahe. Ngunit sa dating oras at lugar ay lumitaw siya dala ang isa na namang bagong litrato. Ang porma at postura ay maayos ngunit sa pagtaas ng litrato, mapapansin sa kamay ang maraming kalyo. Halatang hinubog ng mabigat na trabaho at babad sa initan base sa maitim na kulay at malakíng katawan. Walang bahid ng kakulangan na pampisikal. Magandang araw ang bati, nagsimula sa karamdaman ng kanyang ina, at nagtapos sa paghingi ng higit sa hanag. Idinag dag ang pagsalaysay sa kung paano siya naghanap ng solusyon para lamang maisigo at humantong sa ganitong paraan. Sa katuna

yan, kaya ko siyang sabayan sa pagbanggit ng mga sinabi niya da hil sa dami ng beses ko itong narinig. Sa parehong rason, ang awa na kaya kong ibigay ay ibinaling ko na lamang sa bintana ng bus

Napakabilis, praktisado, at *maaaring mabisa*. May iilan pa ring naantig at nag-abot. Umigting ang habag kaysa sa posibilidad na pagkabutas ng bulsa. Isa na dito ang mamang katabi ko na kanina'y may binabasang resume Bago siya mag-abot ay bumuntong hininga muna, sabay sabing mahirap na sa panahon ngayon ang makakuha ng trabaho Subalit, para sa mga suki ng pagbiyahe katulad ko ay ismuksok na lamang sa pitaka ang sinaid na awa. Sapat na marahil ang una't huling beses na nagtama ang aming mga mata at ibinigay ang anumang barya na nadukot sa sukli ng konduktor. Sa bawat kalansing mula sa pag-abot ng barya, bakas sa kanyang mukha ang halong ginhawa at hiya Ngunit sa kanyang pagbaba lamang, natanaw ko ang nagpakitang pagod na marahil ay matagal tinis

Ang baryang nakolekta niya ay aabot ba sa hapag o tatagos papunta sa kamay ng isa ring biktima? Anuman ang kahantungan, parte pa rin ito ng isang malawak na problemang mas komplikado pa kaysa sa malubhang daloy ng trapiko.

Bar of Thoughts

MIGGY GARCIA

A young man lies in deep sleep
And a wayward soul enters a bar
Greeted with noise, the smell of liquor
Other spirits too, like herded sheep

Drowsy eyes scan the alcohol

They sat far removed from the others
Lonely but never truly alone
But no one there to catch his fall

On puddles of tears made by them

Beside a table for two beings
Absolute passion, it was
Love and innocence, a true gem

Then riots broke loose from within

Shards of glass and a flurry of fists
Though commonplace, it will fade away
If not, shall lead to greater sin

The night grew older, like fine wine

The place now crowded; no one wants to
Leave the place, not like there was a choice
Maybe next time, put up a sign

The youth stirs up, now wide awake

Their tavern now empty, in shambles
Though now it is clear to clean it up
This time now careful, for their sake

Alight

HUNNY KYLE LAURENTE

Theory on Touch

There is no term for this. Even language does not know how to encompass it in a word. The in-between. The question. The bedroom in a state of suspension. The harmless agreement. Negotiation. Convenience. Then, without a warning, pouring. Then, silence

Silence when one turns into a lover and upon which seeking starts. The eyes, upon perceiving the image of the beloved, translate the sight with deception, sewing imagination of presence into what in reality is absent. Ears filter in blunder between how they want to listen versus what they fear to hear. Scent triumphs itself in being the ever head of nostalgia. The mouth, full of language, is thus full of revisions. It is only in the sense of touch that the lover could convince herself of performing a decent investigation. The lover lets the beloved's economy of touch become the story that stages the paradox of rummaging into preciseness her yearning for hidden excess. Because this type of interaction is nameless, it is synonymous to pretension. Like actors, script is followed. Codes define actions, and in turn define allowed significations for intimacy. But when at some point, brittleness transpires, a certain touch so intimate slips, pronouncing all the telling

I. Closing Hours

I was walking on the bridge from Doroteo Jose to LRT Line 2. I felt like fainting, but I didn't. I had to meet you. My anxiety was superimposed by the crowd of people. I know that my sense of sight wasn't actually blurry and that it was just the mere involuntary squinting that my eyes do when my mind is in a state of panic. So from the bridge to Line 2, from Recto to Cubao, I glued my eyes to my phone, watching my favorite sitcom. I suddenly remember how you hate this, but I had to calm myself, stop

myself from thinking of you, and direct my attention towards an other thing. It is difficult for me to carry the weight of myself, knowing I am to dive into a story of crumbling, waiting like an apology letter six stations away. There simply exists a heaviness brought by sadness in which I find it immensely difficult to gather myself against gravity, walk around, advance myself towards paths, cross the streets, and commute. The way I locate myself in a space and constitute myself in it is always preceded by my level of anxiety. I thought about taking the taxi, but I could only afford one ride and I know I would need it more tomorrow morning than tonight - when I exit your place for the last time in the finality of leaving you. It is difficult for me to compose myself and perceive senses of space and time as I direct myself towards certainty of conclusions. But it is not absolutely impossible, unlike how I think it will be tomorrow morning. Arriving is always easier than leaving. Additionally, I didn't want to be late.

I waited for an hour. We were supposed to meet here a week ago, but I rescheduled it to tonight. I did figure that you'd forget that we'll meet here, but I didn't want to remind you. After all that we've said earlier, the code now is to be silent.

"Will I see you?" you texted.

"nandito na 'ko"

"In the apartment? Overtime ako."

"sabi na nga ba. cubao ako. remember?"

"Right. Sorry, I forgot. Pero okay."

"come here?"

"30 minutes? I'll take the MRT."

"sige"

So for thirty minutes and more, I looked around, and Cubao hasn't really changed much. This place has always been a sad story I am scared of confronting. It's the way it looks, just like you said: the juxtaposition of a glimmering mall to the resentful streets of its edges. The old buildings carrying the weight of being left by the stolen time surround the glistening center, as if whimpering a litany of mocking. This opposition of night: no bridge between comfort of illusion, poisonous trophy of abundance, and the bleakness of streets, the series of obsolete lampposts with distant gaps, alternating saturated orange light and shadows on the

whole stretch of the ground. Creases are lines of jeepneys, sets of bangko by the side of the road where tricycle drivers sit side by side as they smoke away the waiting midnight. It seems like a place where rain reconciles with loss, but never did I had the chance to see this place become drenched by the skies. This place is a personal Pandora's box. All I know are stories—now stories, events of the past that were unfolding before my eyes. A few years later, which is today, I know they would rather be forgotten: from disgust to melancholy, from friends' sufferings to my own fair share of losing. It just so happened that all these happened in this space. What a fitting place to begin the aftermath of a shapeless ending.

Establishments close by midnight. You will arrive in an hour, and the next hours will be an introduction to our story of naming. By naming, I mean it is pronounced dead, but I am to know if I could plead for revival or we begin preparations for its wake.

III. Music Lessons

"san ka na?"
"Nearing"

Leaning on a pole when you arrived, I didn't see you pass by behind me. I was a little surprised when you were there, standing. A curly haired guy wearing shirt & maong and wireless ear phones that probably costs one-fourth of his salary. As for me, I'm wearing this stupid cotton dress that foolishly makes me feel pretty, like I'm a real girl. I've always told you that I never felt like a real girl, whatever that means.

The pub felt more like a restaurant than a pub. Chairs resemble those of fast food chains' It remains artificial—numerous yellow lights hanging from the ceiling and abstract paintings with plastic frames hanging on its walls. I look at you become surrounded by it and it feels finished, like circumstances stopped me from assembling the night and even air itself has succumbed. I meant to meet you at another pub, the one with the open mic stage. I imagined I'd sing you that song I've been practicing on the guitar for months now. Meanwhile, as we were going upstairs the

pub and you were behind me, so absurdly and suddenly. I've been conscious about the idea that you might see from beneath my dress. Yellow underwear seems absurd, even. Besides, I am very shy about my body. I know you know that.

A minute later, the waitress serves our bottles of beer. Two minutes later, you plant a kiss on my cheek. We sit side by side, striving composure. Then the way the chairs are designed rendered our sitting positions to have our shoulders and arms pressed in an intact manner.

"Nag-OT ako kanina. Wala pa ring salary," you said as you transfer the beer from the bottle to the glass.

"So manghihiram ka sa mom mo?" I asked as I did the same.

"No choice. The landlady keeps on asking na. Anyway, how's school?"

"Okay lang. Wala namang amusing, o ano."

"But did you manage to get that class of that prof?"

"Hindi, e. Sobrang bilis mapuno."

"At least you'll graduate na next sem."

"Bat ka na nga uli hindi nakabalik dati?"

"My parents can't afford it na. Yung ganong expensive tuition, sa sister ko na lang."

"Sa ano lang?" I leaned in as I asked you to reiterate what you said.

"I said, kay Tina na lang."

"Ahh, okay. Oo nga pala, may bayad sa inyo, nawala sa isip ko."

"That was literally a decade ago. College dropout na nga talaga ako. But also, my mom is helping me get a condo next month."

"May pang-condo pero walang pang-tuition," I scoffed mockingly.

"Discounted lang 'yun sa friend ng mom ko."

It still annoys me how you speak quietly. I think that whenever we talk in a public space, I cannot hear one-fourth of what you say. Still, the hours pull into our night and forget how to count. You talk about work, a movie, and what your mother told you on the phone the other day. It still bugs you that recently,

your sister personally knew this local singer you've been listening for years now, but they aren't yet that close for you to be introduced to her. The bottles of beer are emptied, and your arm soon found its way around my waist. We stopped facing each other and let the silence fill in. A manufactured-looking painting depicting splashes of paint faces us directly from the wall in front. We laughed.

"Dati ko pa sinasabi na mas hindi interpersonal pag-pinta," you said.

"Pwede rin naman."

"Oo, but it's just there. With words, direkta. Almost no transparency."

"Hindi ba balikt*ad? Hindi ba mas prone ang language sa, veiling ba?"

"If concerned ka sa truth, feel ko. Paghahanap sa implications that the author does not mean to say deliberately."

"Ano?"

"I'm just saying, what they want to be apparent, intentionally. Mas direkta. You don't have to figure it out. I'm saying, reading what's meant to be told, not what's not meant to be told. Basta 'yon. Gets mo?"

"Oo. Connotation, ganyan ganyan."

"You write poetry," you laugh at me. "Of course you search for things like that."

"Well, nagsusulat ka rin naman ng tula."

A few hours later, we decided it's time to go. But one of the two songs I have been practicing on the guitar played, so I asked for us to stay until it ends. When it did, we went downstairs. The other song played as well as we were approaching the door. I told you I love it. You told me you love it too, just like the other one.

We hum it by the side of the road, waiting for a taxi. As soon as we get one and are inside, we begin to sing it from the start. The taxi drives into the after-hours of midnight; streets that still aren't empty but the chaos of its compactness in slumber. It was finishing the first half of a movie, when there is nothing yet everything at the same time. Anticipation mocks me outside the window, and the defeat on the look of people commuting after

another mechanical day reminds me that life, in majority, is like that and scenes such like this are rarity; how in the real world, the real filler scenes are the bleakness of the ending of day to day, mundane wars, taking almost the entire duration of the picture I have forgotten if the radio was turned on or off, or if there was even a radio. I didn't hear a sound, but we kept on singing. Soon before the last verse, we had to stop; you leaned in for a kiss and the rest was heavy breathing on the way home

IV. Seeking

We have arrived to your place; to this night when windows are walls that have accepted the theory of breaking Darkness, a formula to strangle precisions, made them dismantle themselves onto the softness of my back, that way of dissolving you write in flicks of tongue

You've told me that you are a 'face-type' of person. I've always figured that I did not have to worry on what I feel about my body, and I am always so assured that because it is the face that you desire, it is my face that you desire, and it is me that you desire Always, always you look into my eyes In return, I master how you look, lying in front of me. Mastering how I engage myself, reclining repeatedly beneath skies Mastering your eyes mastering mine· how it always happens, except tonight. You close your eyes as if you make me into a ghost. Is that perhaps the reason why you wanted me tonight? You shut them as if you are fictionalizing in thought of another. Did you think I would not see in this darkness? Have you not seen the glow of the moon outside the window, its light forcing itself through the glass, proud of how it does not break what it touches? I could see you so clearly But then you search for hands, and all so entirely your eyes are debunked

As it ends, I collapse beside you. You hold me like a bird exhausted of its own ability to fly, of its passion not to touch the ground. I heard you whisper something I failed to hear as I let the heaviness of the hours, passed and passing, pull down my eyes all so slowly before dreaming. A last conscious look is on the bedside table, where the sight of a heavy-knit hair tie that is not mine

breaks my heart. Surely, it's not Tricia's. Her hair is short like mine.

V. Elimination

When you went out to buy breakfast, I decided to take a bath. The stench of alcohol ran scattered on my hair, and the vodka in your refrigerator that we drank after drinking beer in the pub last night did not help my acid reflux, throwing-up rendered me to be fully awake, creating a series of loud pangs seeping in my head. It also smells of you all over me, apart from the scent of Bob the cat; as always, he slept above our heads, on the empty space of pillows when he realized we were asleep.

I always use your shirt to dry myself. I never brought a towel or extra clothes in your place, even if it has already been three years now, and whenever we have such late-night meetings, spontaneous sleepovers follow. It is a given, but we say it's spontaneous. We are fond of branding it impulsion. I didn't want you to think that I assume it. Was it mere shyness? Was it for composure? But this is a thing far from composed.

I search for clean clothes in your closet, and I notice a pile of Tricia's clothes sitting in the corner. It's not like it's something new. All of them leave their clothes every now and then. However, they tend to be unclean, forgotten ones. I know the pile is Tricia's because aside from being neatly folded, its strong scent of flowery soap from being freshly laundered scattered even on your clothes. You told me you met her six months ago at work when she was a new employee. All throughout us, they were always there; the longest one, besides Tricia, was around for two months. Most of them usually last for three weeks. You always tell them the set-up, just like when you told me. It stays like 'this', and there are others. Three years later, I'm still here.

You told me we need to talk, saying you can't stay anymore. I was thinking if you decided to leave me for Tricia. But I know that the hair tie on the bedside table does not belong to her, so maybe you have a new one. You asked to see me last week, but I postponed it to last night in Cubao, as if absence may be postponed, as if delaying decay.

"Breakfast?"

I figured you arrived by the sound of paper bags landing on the mono block table. I look at you from the bedroom, pulling out the take-out and transferring it to plates. I knew that sometime, this morning had to end.

VI. Autopsy

"Hindi na pwede."

The coffee on my paper cup was already cold. I stare at it, resisting looking at you in the eyes. The look of the plates was dreadful, its emptiness, pathetic – competing with me in a contest of loss of offering. I have none to offer anymore, and I have none to say. The slow collapse of morning diluted my words, except for questions. I didn't need repetition. You already told me that I agreed to meet you and spend the night for the last time in the price of an explanation.

"I know. That's just confirming. So, why?" I asked you as I directed my sight to the ground.

"I'm so sorry."

"Si Tricia ba?"

"No. I was also gonna talk to her."

"Anong problema?"

"Wala. It's just done."

"Naghintay ako."

"I told you it stays like that."

"Pero ano ngang nangyari?"

"I'm sorry, I can't bear to say it."

"Nagtiis ako nang tatlong taon. Wala ka man lang respeto para sabihin kung bakit."

"I'm sorry. Wag mo nang itanong."

"Di na lang dapat ako pumunta rito."

It was a different kind of look, that one you gave me before answering my question. It is more than shame; it was pity. It was a different kind of confusion, the one I had. It was without expression. It was becoming a stone. There, on your closed mouth, knocking; a singular question to end multiple years. The silence before the dying utters the last words. This, the finality – and I sit

beside you, out of speech, my entire language's downfall to the single syllable of *why*
"Because of Anne"

VII. Questions for Discussion

Was I angry?

But how could I even utter, first and foremost, such sentiment when from the start of it all, language was prohibited to speak of the word betrayal?

How could one confront the existence of what has long been debunked?

We were able to stay this long because I am a martyr, yet now you condemn me as a saint
Is that it? Have I turned into a saint?
Is it because of my capacity to accept with no conditions?
Do you need someone for whom you could plead?
Do you need someone who could find you unbearable?

VIII. Findings

It has always been a long distance relationship between the two of you since she left. Absence was unbearable, rendering an agreement for it to be an open one too. But she has come back home for good. She now has a reason to stay

IX. Method

You hand me a wedding invitation with both of your names

II. At a Distance

I arrived in Cubao a while ago at exactly nine o'clock. I find myself standing by a pole outside the pub where we agreed to meet, waiting for you. At ten o'clock, for some reason, you were

in a 7 eleven nearby Possibly shy, you told me Sometimes, I think things are designed for people like me who are so fixated on what they want, but are clueless of what they need Like when you would need a moment to compose yourself, so you seek for a convenience store, measuring temporality, measuring steps to me As for me, I am ignorant of such little necessities Perhaps the universe deliberately weaved delay in time so I would have an hour to compose myself, measuring permanence, measuring your absence

Measuring your absence as the last form of loss that is momentary but is yet to be refilled by you, seeking a sense of composure for such last frame of reunion, because at that very waiting, absence became presence. It is in your final arrival that loss shall embark

The ***UPLB Writers' Club*** is a non-profit organization of young writers and literature enthusiasts based in UPLB. Founded in the the 1970s, the organization has since then marshalled its efforts to promote meaningful and socially-relevant literature inside and outside the university.

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